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# TRUE

VOLUME 13

NUMBER 78

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TRUE is published monthly by Country Press, Inc., 1100 W. Broadway, Louisville 1, Ky. Printed in U. S. A. Advertising and Editorial Offices, Paramount Building, 1501 Broadway, New York 18, N. Y. General Offices, 22 W. Putnam, Greenwich, Conn. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Louisville, Ky., under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Greenwich, Conn. Copyright, 1943 by Country Press, Inc. Reprinting in whole or in part forbidden except by permission of the publishers. Address manuscripts to New York Editorial Office. Not responsible for lost manuscripts or photos. Unacceptable contributions will be returned, if accompanied by sufficient first class postage. Price 25c per copy, subscription price \$2.50 per year in U. S. and possessions. Foreign subscriptions \$3.50. Canadian subscriptions not accepted. Foreign subscriptions and sales should be remitted by International Money Order in United States funds, payable at Greenwich, Conn. Advertising forms close 15th of third month preceding date of issue.

MEMBER AUDIT BUREAU OF CIRCULATIONS



**By Major Levi R. Chase, U.S.A.A.F.  
as told to Michael Stern**



*Major Chase is one of America's leading air aces in the European battle zone. He holds the Croix de Guerre, Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross with Cluster, and the Air Medal with eighteen clusters. His bag of ten enemy planes in this area is considered by some military men to be the equal of nearly twice that number of Japanese aircraft, for the Nazi and Italian planes are more heavily armored.—The Editor.*

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**A** STIFF December wind churned up the Atlantic and tore at my flying clothes as I stood on the flight deck of Aircraft Carrier X. On all sides were long lines of tramps, lakers, tankers, sleek transports, destroyers, cruisers and battleships, to make up one of the greatest sea armadas in history.

It was almost time to report for briefing—we were to be told where we were heading—so I tramped down to the officers' quarters. Lieutenant Watkins, Old Horse Watkins, a hulking, square-shouldered blond from Quanah, Tex., was curled up in a bunk studying the tinted photograph of his girl friend who was a WAVE.

"Concentrating?"

Horse laughed. "Never get anything sweeter to concentrate on." He was an exception to the rule that fighter pilots had to be small. He was a big, happy-go-lucky flier whose sense of humor never failed him.

"Let's go," I said.

Our faces were serious as we crowded into the briefing room. You could feel the tension. This was the first time any of us were going into action and we were pretty nervous. Col. William M. Momyer, our commanding officer, got up in front of the blackboard. He didn't waste any time on preliminaries.



#### REPLACEMENT

When replacements for the fighter outfit Major Chase belonged to were needed in North Africa, they came headed by the colorful Major Philip Cochrane, left. Such newcomers to air groups are called Joker Squadrons, but Cochrane and his men proved no laugh to the enemy.



#### HULKS ON THE HIGHWAY

Part of the airmen's job in Africa was to keep the roads clear of Nazi motor convoys. These German and Italian trucks suffered knockout blows from strafing Allied planes. One such road was called Suicide Alley, because Major Chase and his battling fliers swept it periodically.

# ACES

"Gentlemen, we have the honor of being the vanguard of an American-British Expeditionary Force that will invade North Africa. The particular mission with which our group is charged is to maintain aerial patrol over Port Lyautey in Morocco.

"Our principal concern will be to intercept any hostile craft that might try to interfere with the landing operations of the ground troops. We will fly at an altitude of 9,000 feet so as to stay out of the line of fire of our own fleet, which will be lobbing shells into the city. Any orders to strafe specific objectives will be given by radio while we are in the air.

"We have no guarantee that the city or its airport will fall according to the invasion timetable. If there is no landing field for us to come down on—" a P-40 can't land on an aircraft carrier—"we will keep flying until our supply of gas is exhausted and from then on, because we are expendable, we will be in the laps of the gods."

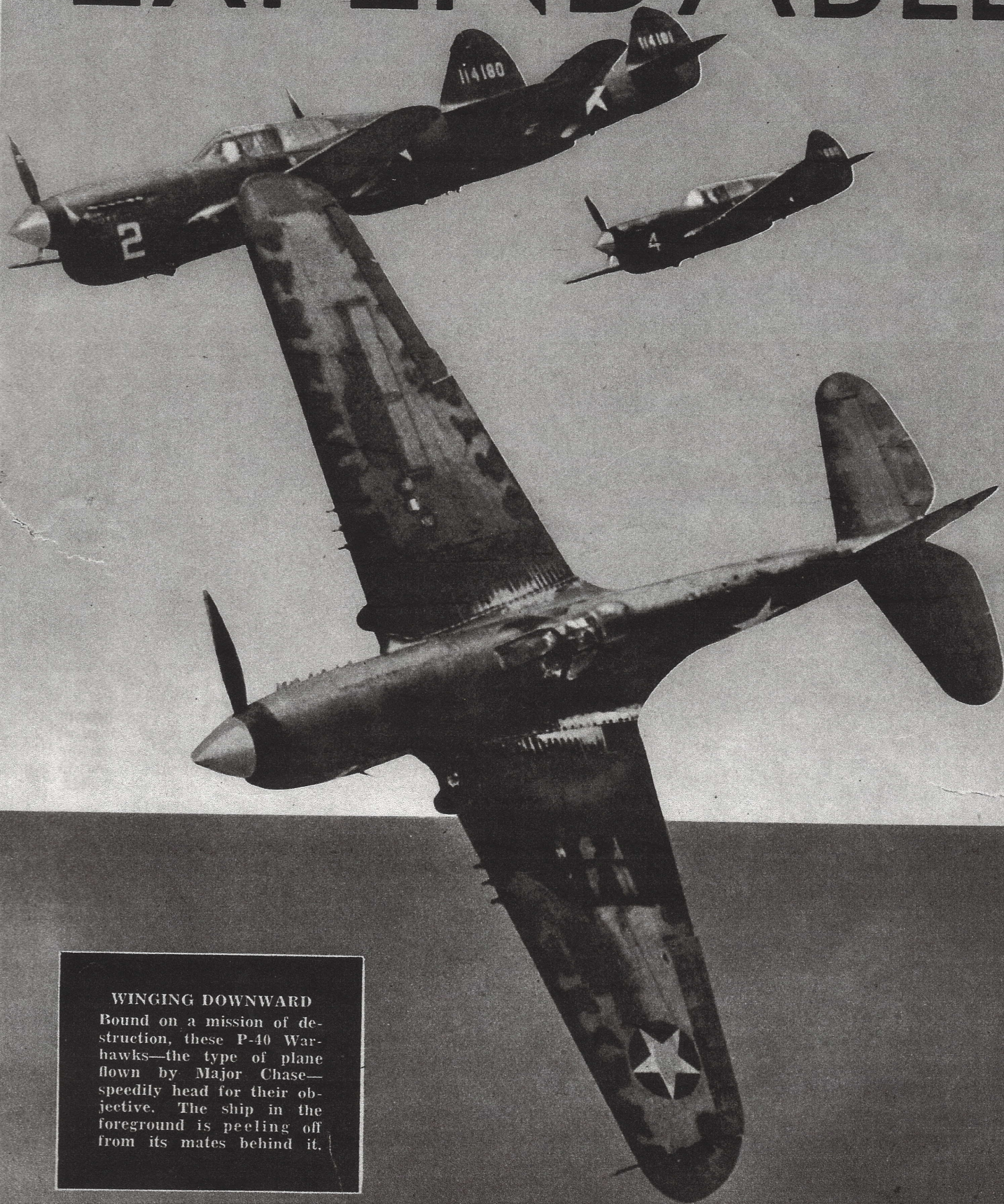
On the morning of December 8, 1942, our carrier steamed to about thirty miles from shore. In the distance, huge clouds of black smoke were visible. The invasion had begun the day before. The reports we got told of stiff French resistance. The old fort which dominated the city still held out and barred the path to the airport.

That was bad news. I was silent and on edge as I checked the equipment in my plane, made sure my parachute was on right, and watched Colonel Momyer's ship being placed in the catapult. The signal was given, the plane shot out into space, and the C.O. nosed her up. Maj. Robert Christman followed. I was the squadron's operations officer. I was next. I climbed into the cockpit and strapped myself securely in

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# EXPENDABLE



## WINGING DOWNWARD

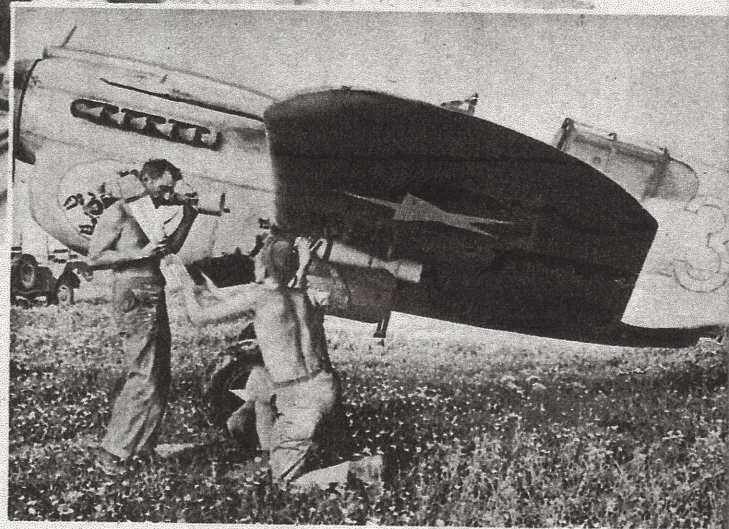
Bound on a mission of destruction, these P-40 Warhawks—the type of plane flown by Major Chase—speedily head for their objective. The ship in the foreground is peeling off from its mates behind it.





#### FIGHTING MAN'S FAMILY

With ten enemy planes knocked down from the skies to his credit, Major Chase came home to a well deserved rest. He is shown here with his father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Levi R. Chase, and his pretty wife, who bore the major a son last April while he was in North Africa.



#### EGGS, THE INDIGESTIBLE KIND

A versatile type of plane, the P-40 can fight, groundstrafe or do a job of work with light bombs. These crewmen at an African airdrome prepare a consignment of eggs for the Axis, affixing them to the bottom surface of a P-40's sturdy wing. This ship is slow-moving, but easily maneuvered.

place. There isn't enough room on the deck of a carrier to launch a P-40. Hence the catapult. I started the motor, put my feet on the rudders and gripped hard on the stick with both hands.

"Okay," I said. My head jerked back as the ship snapped forward. "I'm in it now," I said grimly to myself as I zoomed up after the leaders.

The squadron was over Port Lyautey in a few minutes. I could read from the dark masses below where our soldiers had established bridgeheads. A stream of tanks was making toward the hills. Our naval guns were belching flame and smoke and I could see white clouds of dust mushroom up from the city at the points where the shells exploded. The only gun fire from the city came from the fort. A dozen medium bombers were giving it a going over. There wasn't a French plane in the sky.

The naval barrage let up and we nosed down to have a look at the airport. There were soldiers moving like busy ants below. They looked up at the planes and then went on with their work. This was a good sign. The fact that they didn't duck for cover meant that the airport was ours.

Strewn over the place were the wrecks of about forty machines. There were two runways, but one was too badly pitted

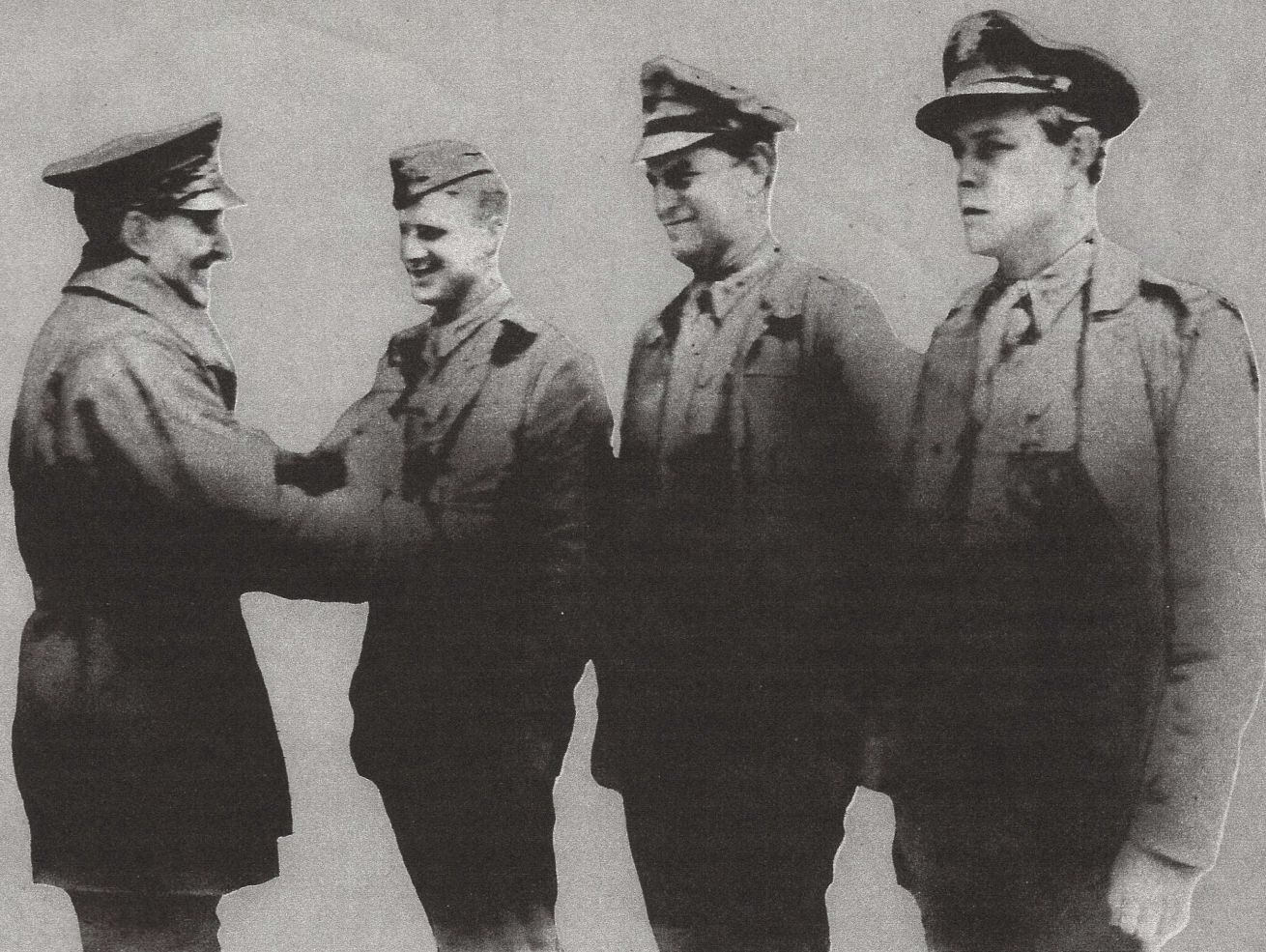
with huge bomb craters and littered with wrecked planes for us to try to use it. The other had a pair of bomb holes in it, but they were far enough apart to give us a chance even though it meant coming in on a 90° crosswind.

Lieut. D. R. Rathbun tried it first. He slipped down, lowered his landing flaps and skimmed over the runway. It was a difficult feat. His ship was still making good time when the second bomb hole loomed up in front of him. He jammed on his brakes. The plane nosed over and pancaked on her back.

I CAME in just over the top of the first bomb hole at 110 miles an hour. The minute my wheels touched the landing strip I applied the brakes. They didn't hold. In less than a minute I was on top of the second crater and I almost had to ground loop to get around it. I taxied off to a parking strip.

We stayed at Port Lyautey for a week, sleeping on the concrete floors of the hangar and eating out of ration cans. Then a Joker Squadron, which is what we call replacements, flew in. Maj. Philip Cochrane headed the newcomers. Phil is the colorful pilot who is the real life model for Flip Corkin, hero of the comic strip Terry and the Pirates. Carrying the comic strip theme further, my ship is named "Smilin' Jack."





#### WELL DONE, COMRADES

General Mendigal, commander in chief of the Fighting French air forces in North Africa, decorates this trio of American P-40 pilots for their work in aiding the French. The intrepid fliers who received honors are, left to right, Lt. Col. William W. Momyer, Lt. Tom A. Thomas and Major Chase.

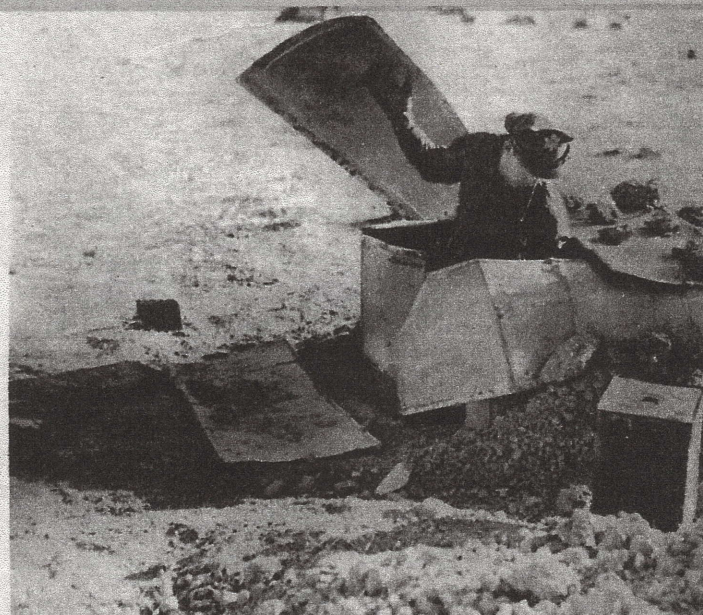
Our groups were reconstituted and we were ordered to move up to the front lines. We flew 600 miles eastward to an airport in Algiers, on the Mediterranean coast. This field was in terrible shape. German bombers were giving it a daily dose and the wreckage of buildings and planes was strewn all over the place.

The next morning we were told that our destination was the airport at Thelepte, a tiny village a few miles southwest of Kasserine in Tunisia. Anyone wanting action couldn't ask for a better spot than this because it was at a point miles forward of even our front line troops.

Whoever it was that called the place an airport had a brilliant imagination. It was a barren, desolate stretch of land entirely surrounded by low, treeless mountains. The field had no runway. It did, however, have one thing to commend it. It was flat and sandy so that we weren't plagued by mud holes.

We dug into the ground, set up pup tents over the holes and climbed in. Then it rained for seven days and seven nights without letup. There wasn't any place for us to go so we just stayed in our tents. Part of the monotony was broken by Arab traders who came around selling eggs, chickens and ducks. They wouldn't take money. They wanted cigarettes, chewing gum, clothing and especially shoes.

The rains subsided on the eighth day. As I crawled out of the pup tent and stretched my legs, I heard the sound of an airplane motor and looked up idly. I judged that she was flying pretty low although I couldn't see her because of the low ceiling. Suddenly she slid out of a cloud bank. My eyes almost popped out of my head. It was a JU-88, a [Continued on page 82]



#### FOXHOLE UP FRONT

Fabricated from metal cans is this covering for a foxhole. The scene is a base in Tunisia, where make-shift precautions such as this were then deemed useful.